

# ***Cedar Rapids Gazette***

## **Vilsack announces Great Places initiative**

03/28/2005 11:20 AM

By: Associated Press

**DES MOINES, IA** -Gov. Tom Vilsack on Monday announced a new multi-agency initiative called Great Places, meant to preserve and promote communities or neighborhoods in Iowa that are great places to live and work.

Under the initiative, state agencies will partner with local communities to help pay for improvements and marketing. Three pilot projects will be selected by October. "I don't know that there's any other state in the country that's considering this," Vilsack said.

Local communities will be asked to identify their strengths, including historic, cultural, retail, housing and so on, and design a program to capitalize on those strengths.

A series of eight regional forums will be conducted around the state beginning in May and local communities have until July to come up with ideas.

Vilsack has asked the Legislature for \$8 million to launch the program, which will be coordinated by the Department of Cultural Affairs.

Anita Walker, the state's Cultural Affairs director, described an example. Say local officials wanted to improve local music programs, linking that to performance venues, a trail system and first-time home buyer efforts.

"There are probably a dozen state programs that could be brought to bear to make that vision a reality," Walker said.

Vilsack said touting existing strengths within the state makes sense, because most survey have shown Iowans think the state is moving in the right direction, a sharp contrast to the pessimistic national mood.

"We are the reverse of the nation," said Vilsack. "People in Iowa seem to think the state is heading in the right direction."

Department of Economic Development head Michael Blouin said focusing on the state's strengths helps foster a positive attitude and younger people like to hear that. "They like the fact we're starting to toot our own horn a bit," said Blouin.

The regional forums are scheduled in Clear Lake, Spencer, Council Bluffs, Pella, Cedar Falls, Muscatine, Cedar Rapids and Des Moines. They will wrap up by June 2. After communities develop their local plans, they'll issue invitations to a team of state officials. That team, comprised of representatives from 18 state agencies ranging from housing to cultural to economic development, will help select the three pilot projects.

"We all know great places in Iowa," said Vilsack. "We have a responsibility to preserve them, capitalize on them, learn from them, help them become even greater."